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Contemporary Dramatists Series

THE SMILE OF MONA LISA

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

JACINTO BENAVENTE

Translated from the Spanish by
JOHN ARMSTRONG HERMAN



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JACINTO BENAVENTE

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JACINTO BENAVENTE

THREE names shine with equal luster, when the Spanish drama of today is considered. They are the names of:— José Echegaray, Jacinto Benavente and Pérez Galdós. All three dramatists have fertile pens. Some fifty or sixty plays have been published by Echegaray and Benavente and Galdós' work, including his drama and novels, are more numerous. The three authors have European recognition and appreciation—their dramas having appeared in translated editions in Holland, Germany, Italy and other European countries.

Benavente's early plays,—those appearing from 1893 to about 1903 were generally of contemporaneous life and often dealt with social foibles. He is satirical at times, again gay—rarely serious—but whatever the play, his love of beauty, his brilliant imagery, his worship of art for art's sake, are manifest. In his later works the serious play—sometimes the tragedy, appear.

In a preface of one of his own works Benavente has given the ideals which guide him in his literary work.

"Art should be free," he writes in substance,—

"and spontaneous; yet the world would constrain art by dogmas and the laws of convention. Art is a spontaneous realization of beauty; this sentiment of beauty must be sincere." He says further,—"In art you laugh at names and schools; all schools are good, all real artists strive to elevate man. Don't follow precedents. You don't break the old moulds of art when you enlarge your vision and enter new creative fields." Benavente believes "in the goodness of great beauty"—and that art is "the divine nuptials of love and wisdom. The artist, the sculptor, the poet pictures the beauty he sees." This recalls Ruskin who answered the sailor who criticized Ruskin for leaving out certain important details of a boat:—"I recognize my fault but it is not necessary for the painter to give every detail of the boat, but to depict the beauty the painter sees."

"The true artist must fly from literary precedents as the true lover must eschew the letter form book and write the dictates of his heart only, to the woman he loves. Serene inspiration accomplishes the best in art; it is this that gives distinction to the writer's style, elegance to his diction; all comes from his inner vision."

At times Benavente fails to see the silver lining to the cloud. Like the English poet (Henley)—his characters hold that:—

"Life is a smoke that curls—
 Curls in a flickering skein,
That winds and whisks and whirls
 A figment thin and vain.
One end for hut and hall!
 One end for cell and stall!
Burned in one common flame
 Are wisdoms and insanities.
For this alone we came:—
 O Vanity of Vanities!"

Again the puppets of the stage in Benavente's dramas are happy, hopeful beings, who see only the blue or star lit sky. Other personages have moods as average mortals and are dearer to us for that very fraility. He strives for the "culture of art, for art alone and disinterested love of beauty."

Benavente's first compositions were lyrical poems; then short stories and novels—but from 1893 his pen has been busy with dramatic work only—the drama of the Theatre. In his dramas, *Teatro Feminista*, *Viaje de Instruction*, *La Sobresaliente* appear little poems of great beauty. Madrid men of letters have wished that Benavente could have found time to have cultivated lyric poetry more generously. Many of his shorter poems are supremely beautiful. *Mis Musas*, a notable lyric in a volume of short poems, has been hailed by critics as one of the finest

lyrics in Spanish literature.

Since Benavente consecrated his life to the theater, in addition to his own dramas, he has translated into Spanish, Moliere's *Don Juan*;—Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*;—Dumas' *Mademoiselle de Belle Isle*;—Lytton's *Richelieu* and Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Among his own earlier plays the best are "*Gente Conocido*," (1896), "*La Gata de Angora*," (1901), "*El Primo Roman*," (1901), and "*Rosas de Otoño*," (1905).

In *Gente Conocido*, a remarkable contrast is drawn between one character and all the other persons in the play:— The impoverished daughter of an aristocrat is the one noble redeeming creature amidst a score of selfish scheming men and women.

In *Sacrificios* a soul sacrifices its human love for its love of beauty. "The Smile of Mona Lisa" depicts Leonardo da Vinci in a struggle between his love of women and his love of art.

La Gata de Angora is a tribute almost divine of a sister's love and fealty for an utterly selfish, but brilliant brother.

Many of Benavente's later plays have been received with great applause and have added to his fame. In a notice such as this but a few can be mentioned. Among the more popular are:— *Por las Nubes* (1909), *De Cerca* (1909), *Los Ojos de*

Muertos (1907), and *El Príncipe que Todo lo Aprendió en los Libros* (1909).

De Cerca (At close Range) is a one act play founded on the theme that class prejudice between the rich and the poor by close acquaintance, disappears. An automobile breaks down and the rich man and his frail and now childless wife seek shelter from the sun in the humble cottage of a poor working man. The cottagers and the rich man's wife discover on better acquaintance that the joys and sorrows of life do not depend so much upon wealth as on health and the happiness that children bring to a home. From that day the cottagers cease to envy the occupants of the cars as they pass and from time to time little remembrances come from the rich lady to the cottagers' child—for "the poor man's child was so like the rich woman's child that has gone to fairy land."

In "*Los Ojos de Muertos*," a powerful tragedy, Isabel exclaims to a great pianist and artist:—"Sorrow does not assail your soul in vain! You say you cannot be an artist unless you have suffered deeply. Poor devils! Do you think because the artist can read the deep meaning of a sonata of Beethoven's he is thus repaid for his hours of agony."

El Príncipe que todo lo Aprendió en los Libros

(The Prince who Learned Everything from Books), is a beautiful fairy story drama for children. The ogres and good enchantresses are all of human form and the young prince learns in his pilgrimage that "We ever have a protecting spirit at our side; that we can if we will make those about us happy as well as ourselves; and that we must dream beautiful dreams if we hope to accomplish good, beautiful deeds."

In *Por las Nubes* the fiancé and her lover are both members of old families of Spain. She has refused to marry him and accompany him to a distant country where he will have an opportunity to mend the family fortunes. She would wait for years—for his return—but—. He casts her aside as faithless to her professed love. As the curtain falls the lover receives the benediction of a virile friend who tries to assuage the lover's grief by acclaiming him for declining to be dependant upon his parents and recalling to the lover the past history of Spain whose citizens often won the highest honors because they went even to the ends of the earth for achievement.

Benavente's dramatic works have heretofore been published in twenty volumes. In 1910 he began the publication of a new edition of his works and a quotation from the preface of the first volume well illustrates the modesty and humility of this man of

genius whom his nation loves and reveres; and whose fame has travelled far beyond his native land. "In publishing a complete edition of my theatrical works I recall with no slight emotion the excitement of the first night's when my dramas left me—the plays I had learned to love because their creation was of my very life and my travail; like the sorrow of the father who has disposed by will of his possessions and wonders what the future has in store for his children—children of his blood and very soul—when the father shall no longer be with them. I love art above everything, but I deeply realize, when I consider my creations, that my infinite love for art has been in vain."

Jacinto Benavente was the son of a physician and was born in Madrid the 12th day of August, 1866. After a course at college he began the study of law at the Central University in Madrid. He had early shown a strong desire to follow a literary course, and he abandoned his study of the law that he might devote his whole time to literature. Through his brilliant talents he early won recognition, and up to the present has devoted his time solely to literature. He is a resident of Madrid, where from time to time his new dramas are welcomed and applauded in the leading theaters there. This dramatic sketch, "The Smile of Mona Lisa," illustrates in a few pages the perfection of

his style; his wealth of imagery;—and that most important element in literature—lucidity. So that he who runs may read his words and see his thoughts.

JOHN ARMSTRONG HERMAN.

THE SMILE OF MONA LISA

PERSONS IN THE LITTLE DRAMA.

LEONARDO DA VINCI, *artist, sculptor, philosopher.*

ISMAEL, *a Jew.*

FLORIO AND ANTONIO, *students and assistants of
Leonardo da Vinci.*

STELLO, *the page of Mona Lisa.*

PLACE

The studio of Leonardo da Vinci in Florence.

TIME

About 1503.

The Smile of Mona Lisa

ISMAEL

Well met, Antonio and Florio, my friends.

ANTONIO

Welcome to Florence, Ismael.

ISMAEL

And Leonardo, your master?

ANTONIO

He'll be back in a twinkling. We wait him here. He's struggling with the curious mob in the streets to see the giraffe.

ISMAEL

The animal I brought from Africa as a present to the Magnifico! And you haven't seen that rare animal?

FLORIO

Curiosity needs good humor and ease of mind,
and we have neither.

ISMAEL

Has fortune frowned?

FLORIO

She's left us altogether. Her wheel's bound and
we're at sixes and sevens with her.

ANTONIO

That's the worst of it. Tranquility dampens
the wheel as it does our spirits and we are rusty.

ISMAEL

Hasn't your great master prospered? I know
your fate is bound up in his.

FLORIO

How could he prosper if all the world assists
and he turns away? His great works are heralded

on the winds—works that would give any other painter ease and fame, but Leonardo has risen to boundless extravagance and gives little attention to the commissions confided to him. The leading citizens are offended and are learning to detest Leonardo, so that our master has come to such need of money that before long he'll be the laughing stock and scorn of Florence.

ISMAEL

Strange predicament for the great painter, sculptor, mechanician, musician, astronomer, philosopher,—this man of universal genius—worried and harassed for money in spite of all his brave protectors. I see extravagance all about me. These galleries where disorder reigned; here where sculptors, architects, craftsmen, chemists, painters wrought; here where the confusion of effort was everywhere, now surprise me by their quiet luxury and elegance. Priceless tapestries, musical instruments, rare fruits and flowers arranged with exquisite taste as if Flora and Pomona were offering gifts to pagan altars.

FLORIO

It may well seem to you the adoration of a deity, but they're only offerings to a human deity.

ISMAEL

And is Leonardo in love?

FLORIO

In love? Was there ever a time when he was not in love? Every hour and every day is love for Leonardo. The roses of Bengal, the crimson carnations, are his love. Swans floating on the lake in his gardens are his love. His capricious Berber horse is his love. The poisonous asps that guard his sanctum there are his love. The golden apples from the tree he cultivates are his love. They say, Ismael, the sap of that tree so subtly flows, that if you but taste the golden fruit, death will come naturally and peacefully and no chemist may find a vestige of poison in fruit, in tree, or in the stilled veins of the dead. Every form of beauty appeals to Leonardo—roses that weigh the zephyrs with their perfume; birds that thrill the zephyrs with their song; asps that cleave the zephyrs with their poisonous tongues. Leonardo da Vinci worships beauty everywhere—in the swift flight of birds—in the graceful undulations of asps—reptiles evoked from the blue Nile of mysterious Egypt. Egypt which strove to immortalize death in its mummies. Egypt, where divine Cleopatra, woman among women,

learned a lesson from the serpent—not as her mother, Eve, the lesson of good and evil—but learned the beautiful art of loving and dying.

ISMAEL

Are you all pagans—stark mad—mad as Leonardo!

ANTONIO

Don't deprive us of our reason and we'll teach you to lend with profit.

ISMAEL

In your unbelief, Christians still! Why do you speak of me with scorn?

ANTONIO

Scorn! Never! You are a generous Jew.

ISMAEL

You've learned the lesson of love but poorly from your Master. Do you forget the times I helped Leonardo when no advantage came to me.

FLORIO

But Ismael—if you've gained little, you've lost nothing—for you stand high in the estimation of Leonardo.

ISMAEL

But Leonardo loves everything—even the asps there.

ANTONIO

Why not? Little cares Leonardo for canting virtues. But your face and figure, Ismael! What a splendid example of your race! Who can tell? Some day Leonardo may ask you to be his model for a masterpiece. Could you hope for greater glory?

ISMAEL

I a model for a pagan artist! Every one who praised it would be excommunicated by your church!

ANTONIO

Leonardo's masterpiece would be supremely beautiful, it would move all hearts to love.

ISMAEL

It would be superhuman to move the hearts of your magistrates and ecclesiastics to just treatment of my race. (*Enter LEONARDO.*) Good day Leonardo.

FLORIO

Good day, Master.

LEONARDO

Good day to all. Welcome, Ismael! I've heard of your return to Florence. I see you've not forgotten Leonardo.

ISMAEL

Even though your assistants treat me with disdain!

LEONARDO

Disdain!

ANTONIO

He called us pagans and unbelievers.

LEONARDO

Unbelievers! That might offend. But pagans, never. Paganism is the religion of beauty. We artists make beauty our deity. All love and understand beauty.

All religions should teach beauty.

ISMAEL -

From whence have you come, Leonardo?

LEONARDO

Perhaps from as distant a land as you, but of late I've been in Florence. Just now? From admiring the giraffe. The animal with the beautiful eyes is the attraction of the city. Our Duke is never miserly with his treasures and he never bargains when it comes to a spectacle for the people. We can pardon him for many things for that. He gave Florence a chance to see your giraffe. I saw the white hands of gentle ladies steal through blinds to offer to the animal, midst their fears and laughter, bits of delicacies. Whence came the animal? It must have taken skill and care to bring it here alive and well.

ISMAEL

True, Leonardo. It was my most costly gift to the magnifico. It's death would have been bankruptcy for me.

LEONARDO

From what land?

ISMAEL

From Africa by way of Egypt and Arabia. I've brought surpassingly beautiful treasures too, which I've set aside for Leonardo.

LEONARDO

A bad time, Ismael. All the credit I might have now wouldn't pay for one of them. I'm afraid even to look at them.

ISMAEL

If you'll accept them I'm fully paid.

LEONARDO

Generous—too generous, Ismael.

FLORIO

He knows, Leonardo, that sooner or later he'll have them back again and their value will be multiplied because you had possession of them.

ISMAEL

(*To FLORIO.*) Discourteous and narrow minded as ever.

LEONARDO

You are right, good Ismael. They have niggardly spirits who do not possess the supreme art of leaving themselves be deceived. I know that you flatter—but I know if you did not, you would still tell the same tale, because Leonardo da Vinci well deserves all that even his flatterers say.

ISMAEL

What fine pride, Leonardo! Never have I seen such pride before!

LEONARDO

It's because I've looked oftener at my inner self than those around me. I know my littleness. I'm

sure that your giraffe never thought himself so high among the stately palms that margin his native desert, as to day, when he towers above the citizens of Florence who crowd the streets to admire him.

ISMAEL

True! But you should be proud, Leonardo. You are first among the great artists of Italy. Why do these highwaymen, (*To FLORIO and ANTONIO*), why do you believe, I flatter! When I, ignoring princes, even the great Duke himself, offer to you the treasures I have brought from Arabia and other lands,—because no one is as worthy as you to possess them. Now that you've transformed your studio with such exquisite decorations, my silks from Damascus will look well here. The Persian tapestries too. And the chests of sandal-wood and the caskets of marble and mother of pearl with their little secret hidden drawers, made for those who traffic in love and jealousy, as they tell me you do now.

LEONARDO

You've heard this senseless babble of Florence too! Or have Florio and Antonio, my students here—

ISMAEL

No, Leonardo. I had but to see your studio—to see the commanding height of your person. Only love's magic can make such transformations. Besides have you not painted twenty masterpieces that commend my veneration?

LEONARDO

Masterpieces? Apprentice work.

ISMAEL

Which was your best?

LEONARDO

Best? My insatiate desire for perfection makes me discontented with my work. I know I could secure boundless wealth and fame if I strove for the applause of the vulgar. It's so easy to deceive the vulgar. But Leonardo only works for Leonardo.

ISMAEL

Your model must be a person of quality when you thus adorn your studio to receive her.

LEONARDO

You don't know? It's the portrait of Mona Lisa, wife of Signore Francisco da Giocondo.

ISMAEL

His wife!!

LEONARDO

Yes, Mona Lisa. Why are you surprised?

ISMAEL

Because you've given preference to her among so many more surpassingly beautiful women.

LEONARDO

But the others are not mysteries. Are not their lives, their little histories well known? The peculiarities of the noble lord of this lady; the patrician beauty of that lady; the perversity of this Signorina; the banalities of almost all of them. Any artist could paint their portraits. But Mona Lisa! No, Mona Lisa is different—Mona Lisa is an enigma. Many people judge her the most virtu-

ous woman in Florence; others think her capable of deception. Who would dare confirm either rumor.

ISMAEL

And you? You have eyes and ears?

LEONARDO

But in the presence of Mona Lisa they are blind and deaf. Today, I imagine I've discovered the enigma—when painting her. Tomorrow she is another person. Ah! The smile—that smile. Is it her soul! It is the despair of my art.

ISMAEL

But you've only finished the background of the portrait! Why the sea there? Perhaps Mona Lisa never sailed a sea. Florence has no sea.

LEONARDO

What better background for the portrait of a woman who smiles? Is there anything more like the sea than the smile of a woman? You say the sea smiles; and you sail on its bosom. You say a

woman smiles; you would discover her heart; and the smile of the sea is not more uncertain than her smile. Do you think this is but a portrait—a family portrait—that friends perchance come to see; to consider whether it is the same face, whether the mantilla has graceful folds; whether it is her little dog at her feet? I know that before my portrait of Mona Lisa, her distinguished husband Prince da Giocondo would frown. He would view it from near—then from afar. In this light—and in that. He would shade his eyes with his hands now—again he would pull the shades to lessen the light; he would turn his head this way and then that, until his authorized opinion would fall like lead! “Yes, yes,” he would say:—“It is my wife—but something is wrong. The expression is not hers. You don’t see her as I do at all hours. Lady Gioconda is grave, not smiling.” And Mona Lisa would say; “Yes, it is I, but I appear older. The gown is not mine. Its fabric seems too rich.” But what does it matter? When neither Francisco da Giocondo, nor Mona Lisa, nor Leonardo exist, when the memory of our fame is dead, people before my portrait will ask:—“What an enigma? Here’s a woman of mystery, this woman who smiles. Is the smile divine or evil? Is it the smile of love fortified in chastity or is it the smile of wicked perversity; was her life unselfish—were her thoughts impure?

30 THE SMILE OF MONA LISA

Who can tell?" And amidst their doubts they will say that Leonardo did more than paint the portrait of Mona Lisa—for he painted a soul that smiles with hidden, elusive meaning.

FLORIO

Master! The servant of Mona Lisa asks permission to speak to you in the name of his mistress.

LEONARDO

Tell him to come in. (*Enter STELLO.*)

STELLO

Good day, Signore Leonardo.

LEONARDO

Good day, gentle page. From your mistress? Doubtless to excuse herself from posing for her portrait to-day?

STELLO

I cannot tell, Signore. You will find my mistress' message in this letter. I'm to await your answer.

LEONARDO

(*After reading the letter.*) Oh, ho! Witty letter! Listen, friends. For then you'll surely believe that I'm in love. (*Reads.*) "To the Famous Leonardo da Vinci, Greeting: Pardon me if I find it imposible to-day to assist you at the studio. My portrait on which you now have been working for more than two years without making much progress, has lately become the theme of the scandal mongers of the city, and my husband, although he has both profound respect and confidence in you and me, is annoyed. Of all unfortunate things, the most unfortunate for me would be that you should never finish my portrait. While I cannot be present again, I send you my gown and ornaments and my page, Stello, whom all people insist is a perfect image of myself. You can tell me in your answer whether the likeness is perfect. If my page resembles me, as much as is believed, finish my portrait, from the copy, and if our features in any respect differ, your imagination can well supply the difference from memory. You have studied my face and expression so long I feel sure my presence will be unnecessary. At worst you can recall my own likeness." (*To his friends.*) What do you say to that?

FLORIO

The little page is the living image of his mistress!

ANTONIO

They are as like as two peas!

LEONARDO

(*To the page.*) You've heard your mistress' letter. You shall be my model.

STELLO

How, signore!

LEONARDO

Antonio, Florio, show Stello the model's room.

ANTONIO

(*To the page.*) Come. Leonardo will carry out the fancy of your mistress. (*Exeunt ANTONIO, FLORIO and STELLO*)

ISMAEL

And you surround your working hours with musicians and singers?

LEONARDO

With everything that may make Mona Lisa happy so that she may smile forever. Everything in sight and sound to please; soft music; the rainbow in the leaping fountain; melodious birds; little dogs in gleeful play; the serious mien of grotesque apes—and last but best of all my love to which she ever hopes to give a mortal wound—because she shall not know that Leonardo never loved a woman more than he loves art. (ANTONIO, FLORIO return with STELLO clothed as a woman in the suit of Mona Lisa as seen in the well known painting, *La Gioconda*.)

FLORIO

Here's Mona Lise, Leonardo.

LEONARDO

(*In surprise, to the page.*) You!

ANTONIO

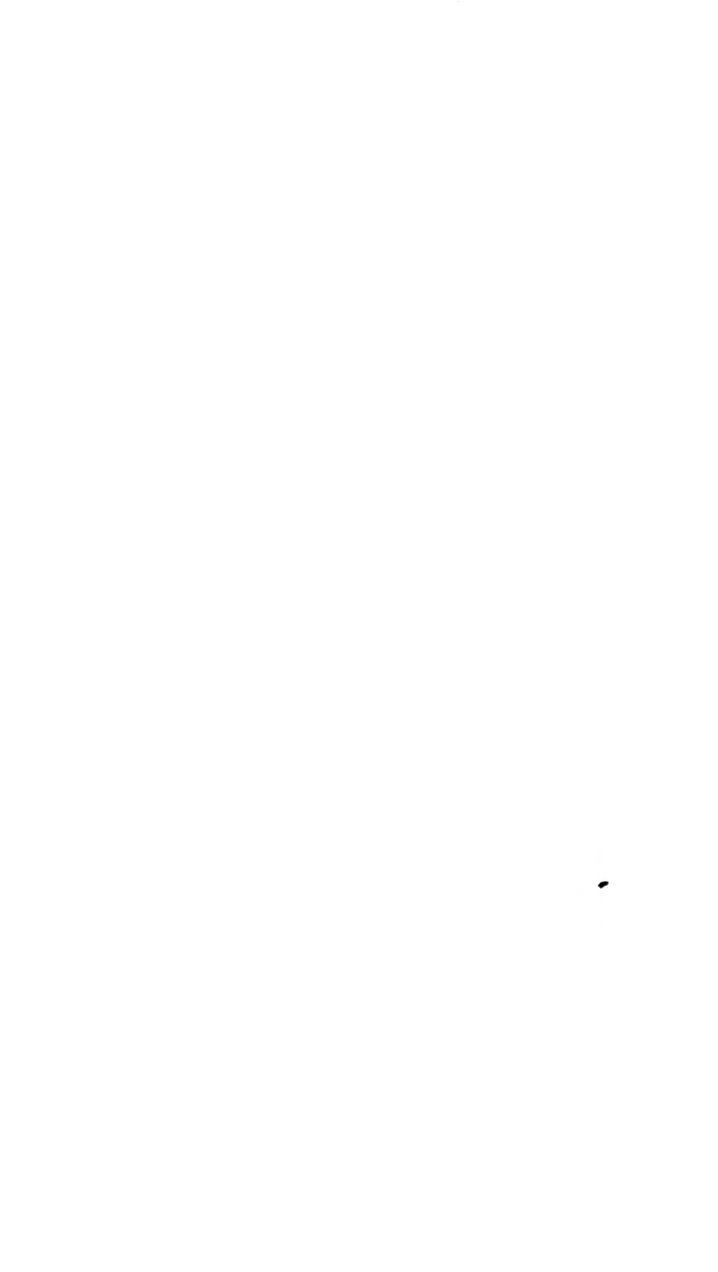
Is not the likeness wonderful?

FLORIO

Who would dare say—this is not Mona Lisa herself?

LEONARDO

Stello! Mona Lisa! Who are you? Speak! What does it matter? Smile as she smiles. Never till to-day have I understood the enigma of a woman's soul. Smile—that Leonardo may give your smile immortality. (*Soft sweet music, almost inaudible, ripples the perfumed air.* LEONARDO, with palette and brush, goes to the portrait.)



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